

JUNCTION INITIATIVE PLAN

REPORT

WELLS/PRENTISS PARTNERSHIP

MAY 1990

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Introduction

This study is prepared under the direction of a group of businesspersons from West Concord. Several years ago, they formed an association for the purposes of addressing common concerns, and to consider plans for enhancing and improving the physical structure of the commercial center. Five representatives from the group were appointed to engage in a planning effort to study problems and prepare plans for solving them. This group, called the Junction Initiative Planning Group has been meeting regularly toward this end.

In June of 1989, the JIPG commissioned a team of Consultants to assist them in preparing plans for the Junction. After interviewing several firms, the group hired the Wells-Prentiss Partnership to conduct the study. Peter Wells and Clifford Prentiss are town planners and landscape architects respectively, and have roots in the West Concord community. This report and the drawings which accompany it are the results of this collaboration.

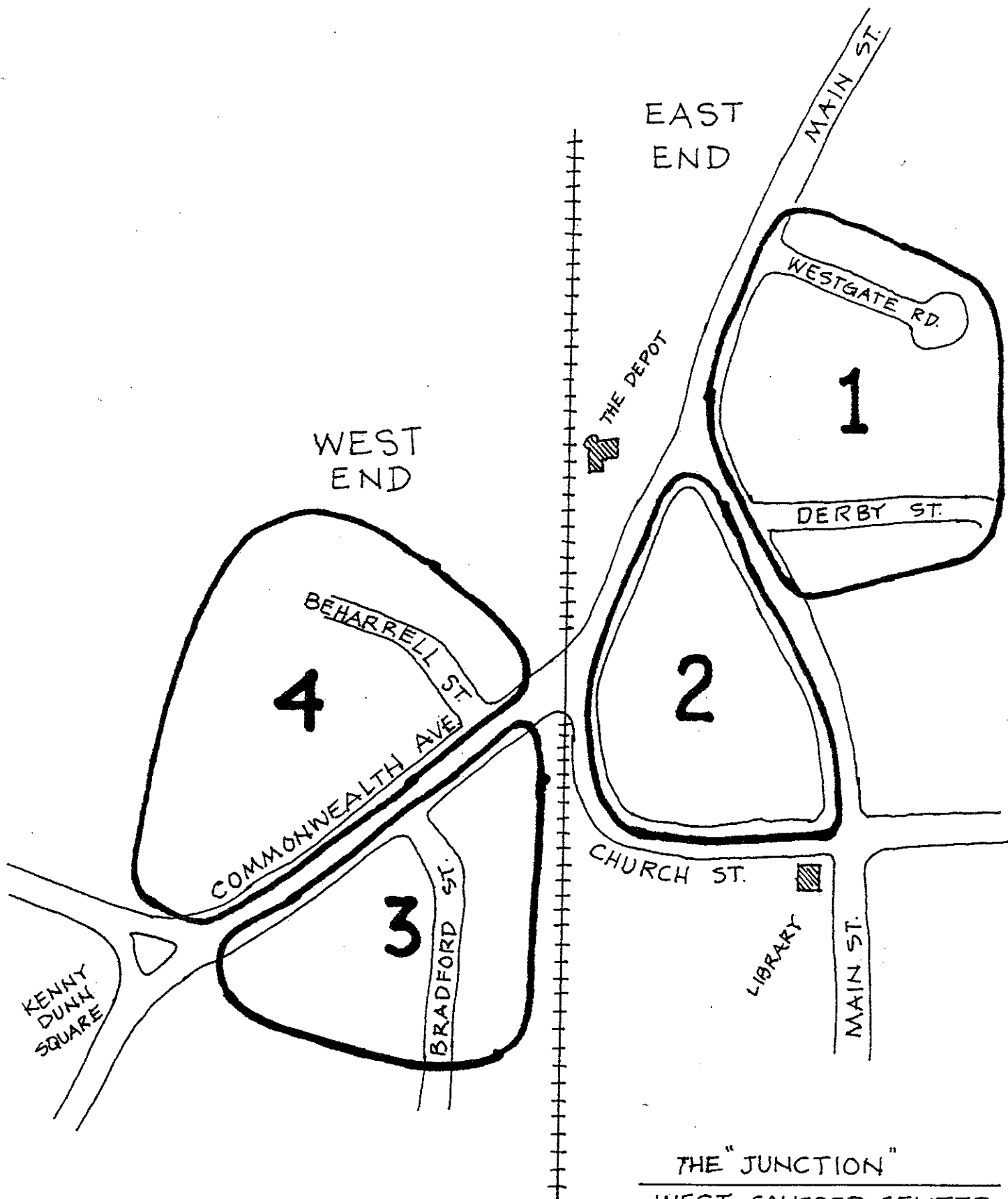
In order to focus on the central areas and issues within the Junction, two areas were selected for special focus in phase. They include the commercial cores east and west of the railroad tracks as they cross Commonwealth Avenue. Each of these two areas have been subsequently subdivided into two blocks each, as shown on the accompanying map. In the report which follows, references will be made to these areas as Blocks 1-4.

The following report is comprised of five chapters, including

- * General Overview and Study Methodology;
- * Design Criteria and Guidelines for Improvements;
- * Public Parking and Related Improvements - East end;
- * Parking and Road Improvements - West End;
- * Implementation Program

The members of the JIPG include:

Maynard Forbes, Chairman
James Condon
Claire Lawton
Peter Mandrioli
William Sullivan



THE "JUNCTION"
WEST CONCORD CENTER

CHAPTER ONE

"General Overview and Study Methodology"

1. Meetings with Advisory Committee

The Consultants met with the JIPG six times over the course of several months to present results of information they had gathered, and plans they had prepared. These were working meetings to exchange ideas and suggestions. In some cases, merchants or property owners not on the Committee were invited to discuss plans concerning a particular location within the Junction.

2. Field Surveys and Mapping

The Consultants interviewed all of the commercial property owners and tenants, and some of the neighboring residential owners. An interview sheet was developed in a format which included two categories of information--factual and qualitative. The factual portion sought to identify characteristics of the property or business such as sizes of indoor and outdoor space, number of on-site parking places, number of employees and other miscellaneous information. The qualitative portion sought to identify owners' plans for the future, constraints either physical or regulatory which may be hindering expansion plans or current operations, and observations about off-site problems such as traffic, conflicts with neighboring properties or other similar concerns.

The results of this survey have been useful to the Consultants in obtaining an understanding of overall conditions in the Junction, and in providing points of departure for preparing plans for solving the main problems in the area. This information has been summarized graphically on maps showing Existing Land Use and Building Density and Heights.

In addition, the following maps were obtained from governmental agencies and other groups:

- Underground wiring plan (CMLP)
- Commuter Parking improvements (MBTA)
- Main Street/Commonwealth Ave. intersection design (MDPW)

Commonwealth Ave. repaving /sidewalk plan (Concord
Department of Community Services)
Harvey Wheeler Community Center Playground Plan (the
office of Michael Rosenfeld, Inc. Architects)

3. Discussions with Governmental Agencies

The Consultants discussed issues of existing policy and planned future growth with the Concord Town Planning Office, the Concord Department of Community Services, the Commonwealth's Department of Environmental Management, and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority.

In addition, the following previous study reports were read and analyzed for information pertinent to the current study:

Town of Concord Long Range Plan (1987 report)
West Concord Center Study (1983 report)
Town of Concord Traffic Analysis Program and
Circulation Plan (1986, Vanasse/Hangen)
Survey of Historical & Architectural Resources
(1989, A.M. Forbes)

In reviewing the 1983 Study, it should be noted that several recommendations have already been implemented, including the public purchase and preservation of the train depot, and the creation of a mini-park on the railroad right-of-way next to the depot. Also, the basic goals and objectives outlined in the report are still valid, and have been used as guidelines for this current planning effort.

The firm of Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc., Consulting Engineers of Watertown, MA was retained as part of this current study to provide background data on traffic and parking, and to make recommendations concerning the feasibility of various circulation and parking schemes for the Junction.

CHAPTER TWO

"Design Criteria and Guidelines for Improvements"

While there are many positive aspects to the activities and physical development characteristics in the Junction, there are nonetheless significant problems which should be addressed. The following summary of existing conditions points out some of the problems or constraints to future growth in the Junction, and gives recommendations about how they can be overcome.

A listing of the major problems includes:

- * off-street parking deficiency
- * on-street parking problems
- * inability of businesses to expand due to small sites and severe parking zoning requirements
- * intersecting side streets too narrow
- * too many driveways intersecting Commonwealth Avenue
- * excessive speed of traffic on " "
- * uncertain future of underdeveloped &/or landlocked land
- * incompatibility of building heights & architectural character among older and newer buildings
- * problems from split zoning districts & building setback requirements
- * proliferation of different street/parking lot lighting types
- * lack of pedestrian crossing aids & amenities

1. The Need for Parking

Based on the survey of businesses in the Junction, many owners and tenants stated that there is a lack of off-street parking available for their customers and employees. In some cases, on-street parking is not adequate or the spaces which should be available for customers are taken up by all-day parkers, either employees or rail commuters.

There is a further constraint due to the rigid requirements of the Concord Zoning Bylaw pertaining to parking, primarily Section 7.7.2.2 Increased Parking Demand. It states that when a building is expanded or its use changed to a greater intensity, off-street parking must be provided for the entire

building. Thus most older buildings, which were built before Town parking regulations were in effect, are now "frozen" from expansion--they do not have enough room on the typically small site to provide sufficient off-street parking.

Also, there are several underdeveloped parcels of land in the Junction. These may be defined to be properties where a building exists which is of low intensity use, and there is additional building capacity (e.g. extra space on the lot not required for parking, or a one-story building on a site surrounded by 2 to 3 story buildings).

These properties can be identified by looking at the comparative value of the land versus the building. When the land value is significantly larger than the building value, the property can be said to be underdeveloped. While the present owners may be satisfied by this situation, their attitudes or financial needs may change in the future, or they may sell to a new owner who will want to increase the return on the investment in the property. This situation has been made more acute recently by the latest property tax revaluation, which has relatively increased the value of the land over buildings (see also the discussion of "passive rent" in the Long Range Planning Committee report).

It is reasonable to expect that these properties will be upgraded in the future with new or remodeled buildings. This will create additional demand for off-street parking in the Junction.

Therefore one of the major recommendations of this study is to create new or reconfigured parking behind the existing stores in the Junction. It will also be necessary to improve vehicular access to these new and/or improved mid-block parking areas.

2. Streets/Driveways/Sidewalks

The major streets of West Concord, namely Main Street, Commonwealth Avenue and Church Street are generally adequate in capacity to carry the volume of traffic coming to and passing through the Junction. However, several of the intersecting side streets are too narrow to handle vehicular and pedestrian traffic going to facilities or parking lots behind the stores. Beharrell Street is only 30 feet wide

(ROW), and Bradford Street is only 40 feet wide. In these and other cases, there is no curbing, so motorists park in the grass strip or on the path/sidewalk which should be used by walkers (especially bad at Beharrell, Derby and Westgate Roads).

There are many intersecting driveways which cause entering and exiting motorists to interfere with pedestrians and interrupt the flow of traffic. Many motorists have been observed to be speeding through the Junction. There are no clearly defined pedestrian crossing areas, and few street trees or other sidewalk amenities for the shoppers.

General design criteria for solving some of these problems include eliminating the number of intersecting driveways (and replacing them with pedestrian walkways), providing curbing and restricting parking along the side streets, narrowing the roadway and introducing "neck-downs" of expanded sidewalk at specially-designated pedestrian crosswalks, planting street trees at selected nodes, and providing scaled-down street lights and other appropriate street furniture.

3. Building Siting, Mass and Architectural Character

Part of the unique character of the Junction is in the fact that there are many "tall" buildings, and most are located right up to the edge of the right-of-way line of the street. This is particularly true along the western leg of Commonwealth Avenue between the railroad tracks and Kenny Dunn Square. This section of the street has a 60 foot right-of-way, with most of the building facades, 2 and 3 stories in height, beginning at that line without a setback. This creates a pleasant sense of enclosure for pedestrians in the Junction, and reinforces the historic character.

The Concord Zoning Bylaw (for "Business" District), requires a 10 foot front yard setback, which would apply to new buildings developed on the underdeveloped parcels, or major building renovations incorporating a change of use. In order to preserve the predominant scale and character, 2 and 3 story buildings should be constructed/reconstructed instead of one story structures, and the front yard setback requirement should be eliminated.

The majority of the buildings in the Center date back 100 years to the time when the Center was being heavily developed as a railroad center (the "Junction"). The style of these buildings is called "vernacular architecture", which is basically an urban version of the New England farmhouse. Some buildings have a more elaborate style typical of the Victorian era including Greek Revival, Queen Anne, and Bracketed Italianate. The form of these older buildings feature gabled roofs, with the gable ends either in the front or side. The siding material is generally wood clapboard.

This architectural context should be respected and to the extent possible replicated in new or remodeled structures. The current trend in architecture nationwide is "post modern" --new buildings are designed using historical shapes, forms and ornamentation. This trend could be used beneficially for new and remodelled buildings in the Junction.

It is beyond the scope of municipal zoning to impose architectural standards or guidelines, and a "design review committee" is not recommended in a formal sense, ie. as a municipal commission. The businessmen and residents of the Junction should act informally to urge that the architectural style of new or remodeled buildings is complementary with the existing historic buildings.

(see map of "Building Density and Height")

4. Land Use and Zoning

As can be seen on the map of "Existing Land Use", there is a large diversity of activity in the Junction, including a mixture of commercial, light industrial, institutional, and residential properties. Not only is the mix diverse from one property to another, but often there are several uses within the same building.

The historical evolution of this pattern is interesting and complex, and is also dynamic--change is going on today and will continue in the future. There is an overall trend toward upgrading of properties, intensification of uses, and to some extent toward providing more housing, office and retail activity; there are signs of a shift away from light industrial and repair shop/building trade businesses. While these trends if taken to an extreme would mean a loss of some of the diversity and unique character of the Junction,

nonetheless many of the aspects of these evolving growth patterns are seen as healthy to the overall vitality of the Junction.

Existing zoning district boundary lines should be studied in the light of these observations. The "Industrial" district which surrounds the retail core in Blocks 3 & 4 is an impediment to some of the positive growth trends. Specifically, the "Industrial" district does not permit retail stores, personal service shops or housing.

The density and dimensional requirements of the "Business" and "Industrial" districts are generally not overly restrictive, however there are a few exceptions such as setback requirements, building height limitations, open space requirements for a combined business/residential building and to some extent parking requirements (as discussed above). The zoning standards and district lines should be changed to encourage more opportunity for limited expansion/renovation of existing buildings and for creative and appropriate development on the underdeveloped properties.

5. Land Consolidation/Public Parking

The situation as it currently exists regarding off-street parking can be characterized by fragmentation and lack of consistency. A few businesses have adequate on-site parking, however most do not. There is only one municipal parking lot exclusively for business customers (the 17 space lot next to Village Cleaners, and this was created only as a result of the old fire station on this site burning down), and publicly owned parking next to the commuter rail station (with 17 spaces allocated for short-term business customers.) There are several instances of conflict between neighboring business property owners over joint use of parking and driveway space. Therefore, there is a basic need to establish a coordinated plan for parking needs, requiring the cooperation of municipal and state agencies, and private business owners. (Adjacent residents also have a stake in this planning effort!)

Specific plans for more parking will be discussed in the following sections of the report. It is important to point out here that the effort will require creation of additional municipal parking facilities, and creative provision of

"joint-use" parking lots serving several business, institutional and residential facilities.

There are two provisions in the Town Zoning Bylaw which can be utilized toward this objective. The first is the provision for Joint Parking Facilities (Section 7.7.2.4), which allows a given parking lot to be used by two or more separate businesses or institutions which have peak parking requirements at different times of the day. For instance, certain retail stores or business offices could share parking lots with the church, community center or restaurant facilities. This technique is most readily applicable to Blocks 1 & 2 in the Junction.

The second Zoning Bylaw provision which could be used is from Section 7.7.2.7 Location, whereby one business can use "extra" parking space belonging to another business subject to a deed, easement or lease agreement between the two. The Planning Board must review and confirm the plan, and there are certain specific technical requirements to be met. This technique can most readily apply to Blocks 3 & 4 in the Junction.

Summary list of planning and design objectives:

- * provide new or reconfigured parking behind stores
- * improve access to parking & delivery zones " "
- * eliminate driveways &/or narrow streets where possible
- * put curbing at sidestreets & restrict parking
- * convert driveways to pedestrian walkways
- * narrow the width of Commonwealth Ave. where appropriate
- * construct significant pedestrian crossings
- * encourage 2/3 story buildings; new or remodeled
- * encourage replication of historical style bldgs--new or remodeled
- * eliminate 10' front yard building setback requirement
- * complete underground wiring projects
- * coordinate lighting standards & other aesthetic amenities
- * retain land use diversity
- * encourage more housing; modest retail growth
- * use land consolidation &/or municipal ownership for solution to current & future parking needs

CHAPTER THREE

"Public Parking and Related Improvements - East End"

The investigation into existing conditions in the Village has determined the need for additional parking. In this section of the report, the focus is on the eastern end of the Village (Blocks 1 & 2). The primary recommendation is for public parking improvements at certain critical sites, and related supplementary private parking. This will solve an existing deficiency particularly related to the 99 Restaurant facility and other businesses in that vicinity, and will also allow expansion and reconfiguration of certain other business and residential uses in these blocks.

In Block 1, there are no municipally-owned off-street parking lots available. In Block 2, there is one small lot municipally-owned for 17 cars at the edge of the business district, plus some municipally-owned parking spaces for use by the Harvey Wheeler Community Center. There is no privately owned vacant land in these blocks upon which new parking could be built, however, there is the vacant railroad r.o.w. on the south side of Main Street, and portions of the Community Center and Catholic Church sites which are "underdeveloped".

Therefore, a plan has been made for over 70 new parking spaces in these blocks which would benefit business customers, residents, the Community Center and Church users. It will provide spaces for "remote" parking by business employees, freeing up on-street spaces often used by this group (especially at Derby Street) at the expense of customers, residents and their guests. It will provide more convenient space close to the 99 for their customers, and take some pressure off Mandrioli's lot and West Concord Plaza lot. It will provide room for limited expansion of several businesses in this area. It will provide more space for parkers at the Community Center and the Church, and a redesign of the driveways will make the drop-off function better. The roadway behind the Community Center will be extended through to Commonwealth Avenue, which will ultimately allow a closing of the driveway access point west of Condon's Liquor Store, which is a traffic congestion point and a key crossing point for pedestrians.

The detailed plan for Block 1 includes:

- 40 parking spaces in railroad r.o.w.;
- new entry/exit between Hamweys/Exxon
- secondary entry/exit via Westgate Road
- bike path extending to the river
- landscaped screening
- enhanced "urban" planting at intersection
- rebuilding Derby Street with curbing, sidewalk
(on-street parking restricted to "residents
only")
- new Carter furniture parking lot
- curbing and parking restriction at Westgate Road

The detailed plan for Block 2 includes:

- relocate playground at Community Center
- build new parking there
- devote back of Church property to some parking
- redesign/rebuild other parking at Community Center
- possible land swaps between Town/Condon's
- enhanced entry/exit road on east side of Condon's bldg.
- align this driveway with Mandrioli's across street

These improvements are shown on a drawing at a scale of 1"=50', which is included with this report.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Parking and Road improvements - West End"

The west end of the Village goes from the railroad tracks to Kenny Dunn Square. Here the buildings are more densely developed, and form a continuous facade from the Post Office to the Chrysler Auto Dealership. There are also several big old buildings behind the stores, with access off Beharrell Street and Bradford Street.

Existing problems identified earlier include lack of parking, difficult access to buildings and parking behind the Commonwealth Avenue frontage buildings, and the undistinguished character of the sidewalk amenities. Mixed zoning creates some problems.

The principal recommendation is to "open up" the land behind the buildings on the north side of Commonwealth Avenue. By creating more parking space, and clarifying ownership and use of this space, the old stores will be more viable, and opportunities for limited expansion of older buildings and underdeveloped parcels will be provided.

A plan has been devised which will provide new parking in a first phase on what is now vacant land (or land informally used for parking). Access at first will be from Beharrell Street and one or more driveways near the 5 & 10, however longer term planning will be initiated to create a major new access to this centralized parking lot. Access will be sought through some of the properties west of the Jones Upholstery property. There is even the possibility of creating a northern connection via the railroad r.o.w. leading to Winthrop Street and possibly beyond.

By creating more parking behind the stores, rear entrances can be opened up, renovation of the commercial space can occur, and the narrow spaces between the buildings can be made into pedestrian walkways.

The second major recommendation is for a reconfiguration of the parking area behind the buildings on the south side of Commonwealth Avenue. The area is entered primarily via Bradford Street, with a secondary access via a narrow driveway between the Hay's shoe store and the railroad

tracks. As cars proceed down Bradford Street, there are four driveways off to the left, and it is not clear where these driveways lead, or who has the right to use the parking spaces. The lot next to Bradford furniture building is paved, but the other area is rutted and punctuated by large stone blocks, trees, dumpsters and potholes.

The plan calls first for obtaining a good property survey to determine actual ownership lines among the several privately-owned parcels and to determine the status of a public "alley" shown on some maps to run down the middle.

The consolidation of the various parcel ownerships would allow reconfiguration to enhance parking, circulation and aesthetics. By sharing the means of access to this parking, a more defined parking lot will be achieved, the visual blight will be eliminated and will help to provide a more pleasing entrance to the businesses, offices and residences. The plan would feature new lighting, curbing, signage and planting; some of the existing trees can be saved.

The reconstruction of Bradford Street should be undertaken in conjunction with the above project. This would include granite curbing along portions of the street, new sidewalks, possible new planting and lighting, and the incorporation of the underground wiring project already scheduled by the Municipal Light Plant.

These improvements are shown on drawings at a scale of 1"=50' and at 1"=20', which are included with this report.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Implementation Program"

The plan described in this report is both long-range and immediate.

Long-range planning should continue. JIPG should continue to meet, to work with merchants, and to engage design services for actual construction projects as required. Coordination work with Town and State agencies is required to refine and monitor those portions of the plan which cannot be undertaken immediately.

For the near future, the JIPG believes that four phases of the plan can be accomplished. The 1st phase identified by committee is for construction of public parking on abandoned railroad bed. The committee should make a presentation to the Selectmen so that they can authorize the Town Manager to begin negotiations with the Executive Office of Transportation & Construction to lease the land to the Town.

Then a detailed construction plan can be prepared, and money appropriated/raised to construct. Some conceptual plans for the intersection design and signalization have already been made by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Consulting Engineers of Watertown, MA however detailed plans and permit requests will have to be prepared.

The 2nd phase is for private parking behind the Commonwealth Avenue stores with access off Beharrell Street. Meetings with landowners will continue, the necessary easement documents drawn up, and design drawings prepared for construction.

The 3rd phase is for the land behind Harvey Wheeler Community Center. After a detailed review of the plans by Town agencies and day care groups, it is expected that the driveway and parking lot improvements can be initiated. Then attention can be paid to work out the land swap between the Condon property and the Town property. This would be followed by design planning for construction. Church participation is to be sought, but need not occur in the initial phase.

The 4th phase is for the land off Bradford Street. The owners need to get a good engineering survey, clear up ownership/easement problems, and then agree on a design plan for consolidated parking lot. Joint fundraising effort among these owners must take place.

At a minimum, the following Town participation would be expected:

Planning Board to study zoning changes and other planning and design issues;

Municipal Light Plant to coordinate underground wiring;

Department of Community Services to review and approve road/driveway changes and work out capital improvement plan.